



We are: Kind

■ Page 2: Valley Elementary School's Season of Kindness included caroling to seniors at a local nursing home.



We are: Experts

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VALLEY COLLABORATIVE

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Valley Collaborative: A Team Effort



VALLEY COLLABORATIVE CENTRAL OFFICE TEAM, FROM LEFT: DONNA SUAREZ, ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT; KATHY DIAZ, HUMAN RESOURCES SPECIALIST; HEATHER VALCANAS, DIRECTOR OF ADULT SERVICES; DR. CHRIS SCOTT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR; JOIA MERCURIO, DEPUTY DIRECTOR; KARI MORRIN, DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES; KRISTEN VAZQUEZ, INTERIM ASSISTANT BUSINESS MANAGER; GAIL DEGREGORY, ACCOUNTING MANAGER.

Dear friends and families:

I am writing to wish each of you a Happy New Year!

We have many things to be thankful for at Valley. I am grateful to have the opportunity to work with such an amazing team of professionals. As you may be aware, Valley impressively scored 100% on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Programmatic Audit (Mid Cycle Review). We also recently received a 100% on the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services QUEST Audit. This audit covered 57 licensing and 42 certification indicators regarding planning/quality management and employment/day supports. Also, I am proud to say Valley just received a perfect Financial Audit.

It takes a lot of work, commitment and dedication to be on the 'A Team.' I understand it is not for everyone but for those who consider this work a calling, the hard work is all worth it.

Thank you to Valley's Board of Directors and all of our staff for their strong work ethic, many acts of kindness and principled approach to the work. I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to work alongside you serving the most vulnerable among us – it's meaningful, rewarding work.

My best to you always,

Chris

Chris A. Scott, Ph.D.
Executive Director

Valley Elementary: A Season of Kindness

Kindness is an ongoing theme this year at Valley Elementary School, and during the holiday season, students had many opportunities to show kindness-in-action. From singing carols to seniors at a local memory care facility to sending personalized holiday cards to children in hospitals, it's been that 'kind' of season at Valley Elementary!

"Students are learning the value of spreading kindness and how good this can feel," says school counselor Rachel Rainha. In December, students in Matt McCarthy and Amanda Aprile's classes collected supplies for animals at the Lowell Humane Society. With the materials they brought in, students also made toys for the animals. "The students are proud of the work they have done and have enjoyed being able to implement the skills they have learned over their time at Valley," says Rachel.

One highlight of the season-of-kindness was caroling at the Carleton-Willard Village in Bedford. Speech language pathologist Jillian Francis came up with the idea of setting up a holiday concert and reached out to a friend of hers in the facility's memory care unit. The students spent a few weeks practicing holiday songs and then headed to Bedford to perform for the seniors. "The response was awesome from the kids and the residents. It was so wonderful to see the kids interact with the residents and connect with them," says Jillian. With music therapist Bryan Thomas accompanying them, the students performed holiday favorites while residents sang and clapped along. Says Jillian: "We're hoping to do another holiday concert next year!"

It wasn't just Valley Elementary students who embraced the kindness theme this holiday season. Valley staff held a Winter



Attire Drive to help Valley students and families. This year, staff and parents donated specific winter items, including, coats, boots, hats, gloves and scarves, for 26 children in ten different families. Students and siblings in need of Christmas gifts also received a helping hand through Valley's Giving Tree. This year Valley Elementary staff donated 78 wrapped Christmas gifts for 39 children in 18 different families.

While the holiday season may be over, Valley's kindness theme will continue through the rest of the school year. In fact one of the lessons that students have been learning is that kindness isn't just for the holidays. School guidance counselor Jen Glow has been helping students make cards for hospitalized children with a general uplifting message that can boost spirits any time of year. Jen says that by making the cards, students had a chance to be creative while learning an important lesson. "The students who created these cards learned that by performing a random act of kindness for children who are sick, we encourage positivity and boost the spirits of people in need."

VALLEY ELEMENTARY STUDENTS SING HOLIDAY CAROLS FOR RESIDENTS OF A MEMORY CARE UNIT AT A BEDFORD NURSING HOME AS MUSIC THERAPIST BRYAN THOMAS ACCOMPANIES THEM ON THE GUITAR.



STUDENTS SHOW OFF THE SUPPLIES THEY COLLECTED FOR ANIMALS AT THE LOWELL HUMANE SOCIETY.

A special shout out to Valley Elementary staff members Jennifer Glow, Bryan Thomas, Rachel Rainha, Nicole Spampinato, Bryanna Reddy and Jillian Francis for their help putting together all of these charitable events! ■

NPEN 2019: 'The Way PD Should Be'

More than 125 speech and language pathologists from across the state converged on Valley Elementary School for a professional development event tailored just for SLPs. Held across multiple sites, the fourth annual Northeast Professional Educators' Network (NPEN) Fall Extravaganza attracts thousands of educators from 30 school districts. At Valley Elementary, the SLPs attended workshops that combined the latest research with practical applications for working with students. "It's really the model of what professional development should look like," says Valley Collaborative SLP and NPEN content coordinator Bryanna Reddy.

Valley was well represented at the event. Bryan Thomas, Meghan Waters, Nick LeClair, Jillian Francis, Kristen Davidson, Maggie Curran, Joanna Abate, Alyson Shaheen and Abbie King all led workshops, sharing their expertise with SLPs from across the region. While the participating therapists represent a range of backgrounds, they're drawn to NPEN for one reason says Joanna. "Everyone has the same end goal, which is to provide the best services for our students." She and her colleagues Maggie Curran and Kristen Davidson led a workshop on neuroscience and sensory regulation. "We tie the information to purposeful, functional strategies that SLPs can use, not just with their students, but with the therapy teams back at their programs," says Joanna.

Alyson Shaheen has been an NPEN presenter since the network was founded four years ago. "I focus on social skills and basically present



ABOVE: SPEECH AND LANGUAGE PATHOLOGISTS FROM ACROSS THE REGION ATTENDED NPEN'S FALL EXTRAVAGANZA AT VALLEY ELEMENTARY. RIGHT: SLP KELI STANDER DELIVERS THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS.



my tool box, the tips and strategies that I've learned in working with my students at Valley." And while Alyson jokes that she's not the sort of presenter that educators pay \$200 to see, her enthusiasm makes her workshop on social skills a perennial NPEN favorite. "I can't wait to share what I've learned with everyone. People can hear the excitement in my voice."

Abbie King, an SLP at Valley who specializes in assistive technology, says that she particularly appreciates the relevance of NPEN to her own work. "I work with a very specific population of students, so going to a PD about higher language is just not relevant or helpful to me. At NPEN, I can go to a session about the legalities of writing an IEP or integrated music therapy, two things very relevant to my practice." And because NPEN brings together educators from some 30 districts, Abbie gets the opportunity to collaborate with and learn from SLPs outside of Valley. "During my sessions, I love the open discussion and learning from

other SLPs on their use of assistive technology across their day to day work," says Abbie.

Bryanna says that the popularity of the event reflects the deep demand among educators for high-quality professional development. "We're the experts and we're all passionate people. Just having the opportunity to bounce ideas off of one another is incredibly worthwhile."

NPEN's focus on arming therapists with tools they can use means that the impact of the information presented at this year's Fall Extravaganza will be felt far beyond the 125 attendees who spent the day at Valley Elementary School. Says Joanna: "Being able to join forces and work together to provide so many school programs with such useful information is where we feel rewarded and know we are helping to make a difference."

For more information about NPEN visit www.northeastpen.com. students. ■

Alternative High School: Becoming Leaders

How does a leader make a positive impact? That was the question for Valley Alternative High School students Alex Baglio and Jenna Carreiro as they joined hundreds of students from around the country at a leadership institute at Disney World in Orlando. Alex and Jenna, along with two adults from the Today and Tomorrow Program, attended the Building Our Leaders of Tomorrow program or BOLT from December 12-15. (To meet the adults who attended, turn to page 6). With Epcot and Animal Kingdom as their classroom, the Valley students spent three days developing their leadership skills and collaborating with their peers.

Jenna says that while she'd visited Disney World before on a family trip she'd never experienced anything like the leadership institute. "You're surrounded by people from all over the country and it really forces you to get out of your comfort zone," says Jenna, who is a junior in the Site 1 vocational program.

Throughout their three days at the theme park the students, who were accompanied by social worker Brittany Maiuri, participated in activities requiring collaboration and problem solving. Among them: interviewing Disney employees at Epcot's World Showcase, a collection of pavillions representing 11 different countries. After working in groups to come up with questions about cultural differences, the students had to put their new interview skills to the test. That was stressful, says Alex, but it also taught her something about leadership. "You have to be a good listener and be able to contribute input, and you have to be confident and understanding," says Alex.



ALEX BAGLIO AND JENNA CARREIRO ATTENDED THE BUILDING OUR LEADERS OF TOMORROW INSTITUTE AT WALT DISNEY WORLD.

The students' favorite part of the leadership institute was the behind-the-scenes tour of Animal Kingdom, intended to open their eyes to future careers, including jobs working with animals. "We got to learn about medical care for animals, phlebotomy. We even saw a ferret getting a CT scan," recalls Alex. While she has long known that she wants to work with animals, the Animal Kingdom tour got her thinking more concretely about her career goals after she graduates from Valley.

Jenna says that she came away from the trip with a much better sense of the kinds of skills that leadership requires. "You're surrounded by all different kinds of people and personalities and you have to manage yourself in order to try to get along with everyone you meet." ■

Mount Baker Bound



Mount Baker in Washington State is known for its spectacular summit views. This summer it will also be the site of a climbing trip by Valley Alternative High School students. Seven students and two Valley staff, along with three staff from Northeast Mountaineering, will make the 10,000 foot trek in July, spending multiple nights camped out on the mountain.

Assistant Principal Glen Costello says that the goal of the trip is to prove to the students that if they can climb the heights of Mt. Baker, they can climb all of the mountains in their lives if they apply similar grit and determination. "They can be successful at job interviews or college—anything they put their minds to and work collaboratively to accomplish," says Glen.

In addition to preparing for the climb of a lifetime, the students are also tasked with fundraising for the trip. They'll be putting together a video that includes student testimony about the trip and their experiences at Valley. ■

Transitional Middle/High School: Cooking Up Independence

It's lunch time at Valley and Transitional High School students in Pat Diglio's class are cooking up a feast. On the menu today: grilled cheese sandwiches, salad, chocolate chip cookies, and gluten-free chocolate cupcakes. But preparing a delicious meal is just part of what this cooking class is about, explains occupational therapist Maggie Curran. "We're helping these students work towards independence, both in the kitchen and in life."

On any given day, students in the transitional programs at the Valley Middle and Transitional High School can be found in the kitchens on the second floor, working on a wide array of skills. Pat's students, for example, kicked off today's session by planning their menu, then headed to the store where they worked independently to locate the essential ingredients. Now back in the kitchen, they're using recipes Maggie has provided, including a checklist to help them keep track of their progress. "I try to break the process down into the smallest steps possible," says Maggie.

The Site 3 philosophy is that given the necessary supports, all students can benefit from the skills that cooking requires. The kitchens, for example, have been set up to accommodate a range of abilities, explains Occupational Therapist (OT) Allyson Melanson from color coding cooking equipment to make it easier to identify, to using visual supports that break down cooking skills into a series of images. "We use visual supports for every kitchen-related task: how to plug something in, how to use a potholder, how to tell when group is over." Allyson says that with such supports, even students who may never cook independently can

benefit from learning cooking-related skills, like following directions or how to break an activity down into smaller, manageable steps and tasks. "And they get the satisfaction of accomplishing their goals."

Site 3's innovative approach to cooking instruction isn't limited to students who can access the second floor kitchens. On one recent day before the holiday break, students in Tina Carraba's class learned how to make peppermint milkshakes from a recipe that has been broken down into images and symbols. As OT Nicole Koles notes, many of the students in the class use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices or "talkers." Says Nicole: "The idea is that students will use their talkers to identify and locate ingredients."

Nicole kicks off cooking group by passing around some peppermint extract for students to smell, then asks them to volunteer for tasks such as opening the package of ice cream. Each student gets a chance to add a scoop to the blender, as well as an opportunity to work on a particular task related to a skill they're working on. "The goal is for students to be able to generalize the skills they're learning," says Nicole. She also tries to combine a social piece to each cooking activity—like having each student add a scoop of ice cream to the blender. "Being patient and waiting for your turn is also a skill."

Site 3's emphasis on hands-on cooking skills in every classroom is unique, says speech and language pathologist Kristen Wilson. "It's really programmed in here in a way that you just don't see in other schools."

For students in the Intensive Special Needs (ISN) classroom, cooking



SITE 3 STUDENT ERIC RECHDAN WORKS ON HIS CHOPPING SKILLS WITH THE HELP OF VISUAL SUPPORTS PROVIDED BY VALLEY'S OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS.

class takes on a whole new meaning; many of these students can't consume food by mouth. During one recent session they prepared cold brew coffee for Valley's Coffee Cart, starting with a trip to the store to purchase the necessary ingredients. Back in the ISN room, the students used switch-adapted equipment to transfer the coffee grounds to a filter bag, using another device to request turns. As with every Site 3 cooking class, these students were working on a far broader array of skills than just making coffee. "They're learning to communicate, access the community, they get to experience sensory stimulation, and they have an opportunity to socialize with other students," says Allyson. "It's a great example of the skills and benefits that cooking-related activities provide." ■

Adult Services: Learning to Lead



LINDSEY BIRON AND CAT ALTERISIO REPRESENTED VALLEY'S ADULT PROGRAM AT THE BUILDING OUR LEADERS OF TOMORROW INSTITUTE IN ORLANDO. ALSO PICTURED: BUZZ LIGHTYEAR AND ADULT AND TRANSITIONAL SERVICES DIRECTOR HEATHER VALCANAS.

When Lindsey Biron was invited to attend the Building Our Leaders of Tomorrow (BOLT) institute at Disney World she was thrilled. "It meant that I'm a leader," says Lindsey, who is part of Valley's Today and Tomorrow program. Lindsey and Cat Alterisio, accompanied by Adult and Transitional Services Director Heather Valcanas, represented the adult program at the three-day long leadership program in Orlando.

The institute is aimed at helping young people develop their own leadership skills. Lindsey says that the experience of meeting so many people from across the country and working collaboratively with them to solve problems made her feel better prepared to step up at work and at Valley. "I learned to be more open minded and that I really like meeting new people," says Lindsey, who joined the Today and Tomorrow program last summer and recently began working at the Panera Bread Company in Billerica.

Among the highlights of Cat and Lindsey's BOLT experience: a problem-solving activity that required them to construct an emergency vehicle using nothing but supplies on hand, in-

cluding cardboard and balloon. Both say that a behind-the-scenes visit to Animal Kingdom was the best part of the trip. (Did you know that snakes and rats get shipped frozen to the park for their animal residents' consumption?) And both Cat and Lindsey say that their time at BOLT opened their eyes to how they can become better leaders.

Cat says that leadership has always come naturally to her, including at Valley's Transitional High School, which she attended prior to joining the adult program. "I was one of the more mature students in class so people looked up to me," says Cat, who works independently at Market Basket as a cashier. Her experiences at BOLT helped her see what she needs to take her leadership skills to the next level. "I need to expand my horizons and be less shy about talking to new people," says Cat. "BOLT forced me to get out of my bubble."

For Lindsey, the Orlando adventure confirmed a passion for observation. As part of her trip, Lindsay assisted newsletter editor Jennifer Berkshire by taking detailed notes about the experience. "I didn't want to forget anything that happened," says Lindsey. ■

For Valley's Adults, a Culture of Helping

The workday is about to begin and the milieu at #25 Linnell is abuzz with Individuals and staff preparing for the busy day ahead. At the table designated "Chelmsford High School" Ryan Poisson is keeping an eye on things. "I make sure the crew members stay at the table and don't wander off," says Ryan. "It's a way that I can be helpful."

Ryan works independently at Chelmsford High, assisting the head janitor during the school day and helping the athletic department in the afternoons. His deep knowledge about the facility—he attended CHS and graduated from there in 2009—means that he can assist the Valley work crew and their job coach. "Because I know the place so well I can tell people where things are located or what the schedule is," says Ryan.

Adult Services Program Coordinator Matt Gentile describes the role that Ryan plays in the Today and Tomorrow Program as peer-to-peer mentoring. "It's really the nature of the program. People are looking out for each other," says Matt, who previously worked at Valley's Alternative High School as a guidance counselor. The supportive nature of the community also means that Individuals are encouraged to step into leadership roles if they're interested. "You'll see higher-functioning Individuals going out of their way to look out for their lower functioning peers so that their voices can be heard," says Matt.

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For Valley's Adults, a Culture of Helping



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: DANIEL EASTWOOD, MELISSA DESROCHES, MINDY MALAS, RYAN POISSON, JOSEPH SEPE, MEAGHAN CROUCHER AND TONY SIMAS. RYAN WORKS INDEPENDENTLY AT CHELMSFORD HIGH BUT IS ALWAYS READY TO ASSIST THE INDIVIDUALS WHO WORK AT CHS AS PART OF A CREW.

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Peer-to-peer mentoring can also be a source of support for Individuals who are making the transition to independent employment. When Jeremy Cyr started a new job at TJ Maxx in Chelmsford this summer, he had a friend from the Today and Tomorrow Program there to offer help if he needed it. Melaina Chaput has worked at TJ Maxx for 13 years—she currently oversees the dressing

room—and says she was thrilled to find out that a member of her Valley family would be joining her at work. “Jeremy is my buddy. I’m happy to help him out,” says Melaina.

With her long experience working independently at the store, Melaina was able to show Jeremy the ropes, including helping him punch in and out and explaining to him that breaks are timed. “The transition to independent employment can be a big

adjustment,” says Matt. “Melaina’s assistance has really helped Jeremy settle in and keep him on track.”

Melaina says that the role of mentor is one that has come naturally to her. “I try to be helpful in a way that’s friendly.” That’s exactly what Jeremy says he appreciates about having a friend from Valley at work. “She’s nice,” says Jeremy. “She helps out.”

Back at the Chelmsford High School table, Ryan is making sure that the members of today’s crew are ready to head to the van. And they listen. “The other Individuals see Ryan as someone who works independently and so they look up to him,” says Matt.

Matt says that he’s hoping that the sort of peer mentoring embodied by Ryan and Melaina can become a more formal part of the Today and Tomorrow Program in the future. “When Individuals start seeing themselves as leaders, it means that they’re taking their jobs seriously,” says Matt. ■



Valley Vocational Students to the Rescue

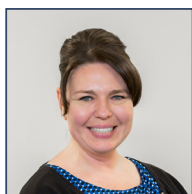
When a sudden snow storm hit Massachusetts in early December, students who work in Valley’s landscaping shop were ready. The students volunteered to assist the Billerica Fire Department, putting their emergency shoveling skills to work, clearing the ground around area fire hydrants. The students did a fantastic job says program coordinator Craig Turner. Here’s hoping they won’t have to use those shovels too often this winter!

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Valley staff prepare to serve up a holiday feast. According to Joe Reilly, he and his crew of student and adult workers prepared 550 dinners this Thanksgiving, including 170 pounds of turkey, 110 pounds of butternut squash, 120 pounds of potatoes and 15 gallons of gravy. The meal was served by staff at five different Valley sites, including Site 3, pictured here. In addition to the meals for Valley staff, students and adults, Joe and his team also served seniors in Billerica. "We've been doing this for 20 years and we're serving more folks every year," says Joe.



Valley Collaborative Board

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